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Dangerous Demagogues and Weaponized Communication

Jennifer R. Mercieca 

This essay argues that we can usefully separate “heroic demagogues” from “dangerous demagogues” by whether or not the demagogue allows themselves to be held accountable for their words and actions. “Dangerous demagoguery” can be thought of as “weaponized communication” that uses words as weapons to achieve the dangerous demagogue’s strategic goals. The essay examines several recent examples of dangerous demagogues using weaponized communication strategies, including conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, President Donald Trump, and Neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin. Weaponized communication is a danger in any democracy as it corresponds with democratic erosion.

Keywords: authoritarianism, dangerous demagogue, demagoguery, democracy, heroic demagogue, weaponized communication

“These people are lying scum,” said infamous conspiracy theorist Alex Jones on September 29, 2018, as he “crashed” a panel at the *Texas Tribune’s* Tribune Politics Festival. “These are the people who helped Hitler, helped Stalin come to power. These are the authoritarian bootlickers of the establishment,” Jones said, pointing at my co-panelists and me. “I’m here to expose this fraud” (InfoWars). The panel was entitled, “The Political Rhetoric of Donald Trump and Alex Jones: On Fake News and Weaponized Communications,” and I was one of three panelists there to discuss the ideas contained in this essay.

The Anti-Defamation League called Jones “the conspiracy King” for things he has said on his *InfoWars* program (19). Jones has claimed to believe, among many things, that the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Washington, DC were a “false flag” perpetrated by the US government. He has denied there was a mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 and claimed that news stories about the tragedy featured crisis actors rather than murdered children and their grieving parents. In Jones’s world, juice boxes make

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men infertile, tainted drinking water turns frogs gay, Bill Clinton caused the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, a globalist conspiracy could send every American into Federal Emergency Management Agency camps, and so on. During the previous several months Jones had been “deplatformed”—banned from YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter; Apple and Microsoft banned his *InfoWars* app; and PayPal ceased facilitating InfoWars’s financial transactions—all because he violated the platforms’ terms of service, largely on the grounds of hate speech and inciting violence. Prior to being deplatformed, Jones had a tremendous following. By January 2017, Jones had attracted nearly 9 million monthly unique page visitors, who returned to his page nearly 50 million times each month. Jones’s YouTube videos had accumulated more than 1.2 billion views (Rutenberg). All that attention had translated into great wealth for Jones, who used his InfoWars website to sell dietary supplements, t-shirts, and emergency preparedness supplies—items that appealed to his conspiracy-minded audience (Brown).

Suddenly deplatformed, Jones struggled to reach his audience. Carrying a bullhorn and aggressively standing in front of the stage, Jones had come to the *Tribune* festival to make a video for InfoWars. That video portrayed Jones as a victim of censorship as well as a warrior for free speech. “I get in their face and I expose the truth and that’s what I’m gonna do,” Jones said in the video (InfoWars). “You guys call people a Nazi all day long, then you guys try to suppress people’s speech, you are the modern book burners,” he accused the panelists. “Hey, hey Weasel Warzel,” Jones yelled through his bullhorn at *Buzzfeed* reporter Charlie Warzel as he leaned in toward Warzel on the stage just a few feet away: “You go around policing to get my videos taken down, so don’t sit there and act like that when I talk over a fascist like you that I’m a bad person. You’re a bootlicker of the establishment and a shameful person and a disgrace to this country.”

After several minutes of Jones “bullhorning” our panel, I raised my hand to request permission to speak. He made eye contact with me and with a head jerk in my direction, he briefly paused so that I might ask my question. “Would you like to join us Alex?” I asked. “We could get you a chair and a mic and have a conversation?” Jones began to shake his head no, but he did not have time to respond more fully to my invitation because his attention was immediately absorbed by a confederate whom he had arranged to “attack” him. The confederate stuck his tongue out at Jones and pretended to hit him with a paper fan while Jones called him “your average mentally ill Democrat” and said he “felt sorry” for the man’s “mental illness.” Eventually the Austin Police Department escorted both the “attacker” and Jones out of the panel—the *InfoWars* video showed him leaving, with his voice modified to make Jones sound devilish as he said, “I am here in defiance of your tyranny. We are only growing stronger.” Jones relocated to a nearby street corner and continued his bullhorned diatribe until the rain finally drove him away.

Alex Jones did not come to our panel to persuade us we were globalists paid by George Soros to destroy him and freedom. He did not come to our panel to exchange good reasons for his beliefs, nor did he have our consent to engage in communication with us. Rather, Jones attended our panel as an *ad baculum* threat of force or intimidation—to stage a confrontation and “expose” us as “boot-lickers” to his audience for violent retribution. Because Jones talked over us with his bullhorn, we could not enter into discussion or debate with him. Because Jones refused to sit down and discuss weaponized communication with us, we could not question him about his tactics. Because Jones would not converse, we could not hold him accountable for his words and actions.

After Jones left, the panelists discussed how his “crashing” our panel was a perfect example of the points that we had been making about his rhetoric. As I said then and as I will argue in this essay, Jones’s tactics in “crashing” our panel can best be understood as “weaponized communication,” or the strategic use of communication as an instrumental tool and as an aggressive means to gain compliance and avoid accountability. Specifically, weaponized communication is a collection of rhetorical techniques used by what I argue are “dangerous demagogues.” In the following pages, I first distinguish between “heroic demagogues” and “dangerous demagogues,” and second, I argue that dangerous demagogues are those like Jones who refuse to be held accountable for their words and actions. Finally, I conclude that weaponized communication is itself dangerous because it facilitates democratic erosion and denies consent.

Previous Scholarship on Demagogues and Demagoguery

Rhetorical studies has frequently examined the techniques of demagogues (as demagoguery), but it has struggled to establish the criteria by which we could legitimately identify demagogues. This essay seeks to carefully separate the questions of who can or should be considered a “demagogue” from the question of how demagogues use rhetoric to gain power. After first acknowledging that demagogues can be heroic leaders of the people rather than dangerous villains, I argue that there is a single criterion by which dangerous demagogues can be identified: whether or not they allow themselves to be held accountable for their words and actions. Further, I argue that dangerous demagogues use weaponized communication techniques to gain compliance and prevent themselves from being held accountable. Heroic demagogues certainly use rhetoric, but they do not weaponize communication. Our analysis of both demagogues and demagoguery will improve if we distinguish the “demagoguery” of heroic demagogues from the “demagoguery” of dangerous demagogues. In this essay I focus exclusively on the weaponized communication tactics of dangerous demagogues.

Historically, we have recognized that “demagoguery” (the techniques, tactics, and strategies used by demagogues) is a potential danger in any government based on the will of the people in which political power is won or lost based on

persuasion and voting (Mathews). For that reason, rhetorical scholars, in their attempts to distinguish “good” rhetoric from “bad” rhetoric or “noble” rhetoric from “base” rhetoric, have been concerned implicitly and explicitly with the question of demagoguery. Largely in response to Adolf Hitler’s rise to power in Germany and later Joseph McCarthy’s rise to the political forefront in the United States, rhetorical scholars like Barnet Baskerville, Ernest G. Bormann, William Norwood Brigance, and Charles W. Lomas began to take an interest in demagoguery in the early 1950s. Lomas, for example, hoped to “identify and combat demagoguery when it arises in respectable quarters” (160). He described demagoguery as, “the process by which skillful speakers and writers seek to influence public opinion by employing the traditional tools of rhetoric with complete indifference to truth ... its primary motivation is personal gain” (161). As Lomas’s definition implies, earlier rhetorical scholarship on demagoguery was mainly interested in exposing demagoguery in the hope of preventing the illegitimate use of rhetoric by those who seek political power. In these analyses, a “demagogue” was one who used “demagoguery,” demagoguery being the essential characteristic of the demagogue.

More recently, scholars have called into question conventional descriptions of demagogues and demagoguery. In 2004, J. Michael Hogan and L. Glen Williams asked scholars to re-interrogate our assumptions about demagogues when they argued that labeling Huey Long as a “southern demagogue reflects a cultural bias, even a sort of elitist stereotyping” (151). The next year, Patricia Roberts-Miller pressed scholars to re-think our concept of demagoguery in order to “develop a critical rhetoric that articulates standards for good public discourse that does not exclude the already excluded” (“Democracy” 460). Responses to Roberts-Miller by James Francis Darsey, Steven R. Goldzwig, and J. Michael Hogan and David Tell argued that demagoguery is a sociological, rather than a rhetorical, problem and that demagoguery studies were thriving, albeit under other names. In another approach to revitalizing demagoguery studies, Joshua Gunn examined how desire, hysterics, and love motivate both demagogues and their audiences (“Hystericizing”). Since 2015, Donald Trump’s political campaign has renewed both public and scholarly interest in demagogues and demagoguery. In particular, Roberts-Miller has usefully and carefully helped us to see that demagogues emerge from “demagogic cultures,” which are rife with bad argumentation and polarizing propaganda (*Rhetoric*).

My contribution to these discussions of demagogues and demagoguery is to argue that there are two kinds of demagogues—one a hero and one a villain—and that we can identify the villainous demagogue by whether or not they permit themselves to be held accountable for their words and actions. I argue that *unaccountability* is the defining or essential feature of the dangerous demagogue. The dangerous demagogue’s demagoguery—their rhetorical tactics—are useful insofar as they help demagogues to avoid accountability. As we saw with the

example of Alex Jones above and as I will explain in detail below, dangerous demagogues often use “weaponized communication” strategies to accomplish their goals.

Who Is a Demagogue?

Accusing someone of being a demagogue is primarily a fear appeal coupled with a critique of *argumentum ad verecundiam* (argument from authority) that constitutes a person as an unfit leader of the people. How the demagogue is judged “unfit” changes based on how “demagogue” is constructed within its “political fiction” (Mercieca, *Founding*). All political communities have a political fiction that enables self-understanding. A culture’s political fiction tells the story of political heroes, villains, and the births and deaths of governments. Within each political fiction we find a character who is often labeled “demagogue”—but who is also sometimes labeled “agitator,” “mob-master,” or (more recently) “troll.” No matter which political fiction we examine, we find that the accusation of being a demagogue rests primarily on the fear of power resting in the wrong hands.

Despite today’s common negative connotation, we can understand a “demagogue” to be a hero or a villain. If we turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we learn that a demagogue (as a noun) has two contradictory definitions. The first definition is neutral or positive: “in ancient times, a leader of the people; a popular leader or orator who espoused the cause of the people against any other party in the state.” The second definition is explicitly negative: “a leader of a popular faction, or of the mob; a political agitator who appeals to the passions and prejudices of the mob in order to obtain power or further his own interests; an unprincipled or factious popular orator.” The *OED* describes the demagogue as either a hero or a villain—the demagogue either defends the people’s interests from corruption or uses polarizing rhetoric for his or her own gain. These opposing characterizations reflect the fact that it is difficult to know how to think about demagogues and also reflect our historic ambiguity about popular rule.

We are not used to thinking of a “demagogue” as a hero, but that might be because our understanding of demagogues has come primarily from the critics of Athenian democracy like Aristotle, who believed that it was at best “government in the interest of the poor” (1279b), and like Plato, who believed that it was a government in which “the poor, winning the victory, put to death some of the other party, drive out others, and grant the rest of the citizens an equal share in both citizenship and offices” (557a). Classicist M. I. Finley explained that while “there is no more familiar theme in the Athenian picture (despite the rarity of the word) than the demagogue and his adjutant, the sycophant,” our understanding of Greek political life has been unduly influenced by antidemocratic writers (4). After all, according to Finley, “there is no eternal law ... why ‘demagogue,’ a ‘leader of the people,’ must become a ‘mis-leader of the people’” (6).

Writing in 1938, American public policy professor and journalist Max Lerner distinguished between the “true demagogue,” who “loves the material he works with, the material of the mass mind, and he seeks always to raise the level of that material, as an artist seeks always to work in a denser and more difficult medium” and the “fake demagogue,” who “fears his art: he hates and despises the medium he works with; he solicits the extraneous aid of those with large and secret campaign funds; when he finds himself in a tight spot, he falls back on the steel and brutality of police or vigilantes or storm troopers” (110). Lerner’s “true demagogue” is the heroic character of the *OED*’s first definition—“a popular leader or orator who espoused the cause of the people against any other party in the state”—and Lerner’s “fake demagogue” is the villainous character of the *OED*’s second definition—“a political agitator who appeals to the passions and prejudices of the mob in order to obtain power or further his own interests; an unprincipled or factious popular orator.” Of course, we are certainly more used to thinking of a “demagogue” as a villainous member of the political community. If we agree with Lerner that the true leader of the people is the heroic character and the fake leader of the people is the villainous character, then how can we spot the dangerous demagogue who might use “the steel and brutality of police or vigilantes or storm troopers” to seize and retain power? We can begin to do this by noting who uses rhetoric as a weapon to avoid accountability.

According to classicist Ernest Barker, in ancient Athens “the ‘demagogue’ proper had no official position; he simply exercised, in a peculiar degree and with a permanent influence, the right of the private member of the assembly to take the initiative and propose a policy” (qtd. in Aristotle, *The Politics* 168nLL). Historians trace the rise of the “demagogue” to 429 BCE when Pericles died, opening up the space for these “unofficial” leaders of the people to rise to power. The danger, according to Barker, was that “such a leader—having no official executive position—could exercise initiative and determine policy without incurring political responsibility, since it was not his duty to execute the policy which he had induced the assembly to accept” (Barker, qtd. in Aristotle, *The Politics* 169n50). The dangerous demagogue of Athenian political culture urged for policies but could not be held accountable for those policies’ subsequent success or failure—they were unaccountable. The confluence of the rise of the irresponsible or unaccountable leader of the people, democratic rule, and rhetorical training led some political observers in Athens to imagine that to propose policy and lead the people was *necessarily* to mislead the people.

Political accountability is necessary because rhetoric and political power are so easily abused. Just leadership *requires* accountability and transparency—an unaccountable leader is dangerous in any political community. As political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt explain in *How Democracies Die*, unaccountable leaders are especially dangerous in democratic governments. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, historically democratic governments have been overturned

by authoritarian or unaccountable leaders like Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini who: (1) rejected or showed a weak commitment to democratic rules; (2) denied the legitimacy of political opponents; (3) tolerated or encouraged violence; and (4) were ready to curtail the civil liberties of opponents and the media (23–24). The essential or defining feature of a demagogue as an “unaccountable leader” is useful for understanding who is a dangerous or fake demagogue and who is a heroic or true demagogue because only dangerous demagogues would seek power as an unaccountable or authoritarian leader. Accountable leaders of the people (heroic demagogues) would show a commitment to the democratic process, respect political opposition, discourage violence, and protect civil liberties. Heroic demagogues would use rhetoric to affirm human dignity, to lift the spirits of the people, to debate values, and to solve problems by consent. All demagogues are not authoritarians—some are legitimate and heroic “leaders of the people” who defend the rights of the people from the other parts of the state and do so by leading justly, respecting the rule of law, and allowing themselves to be held accountable for their words and actions.

Dangerous Demagoguery: Weaponized Communication

Barker and Levitsky and Ziblatt did not consider the rhetorical strategies by which authoritarian leaders gained and retained power, but it seems clear from Barker’s understanding of how “unofficial leaders” gained power in ancient Athens, and Levitsky and Ziblatt’s understanding of how “authoritarians” gained power in Germany and Italy, that rhetoric was central. To fill this lacuna, I have argued that dangerous demagogues use a certain kind of rhetoric: they use “weaponized communication” tactics. Again, by weaponized communication I mean the strategic use of communication as an instrumental tool and as an aggressive means to gain compliance and avoid accountability. Communication is instrumental when it is used as a tool, a means to an end. Communication as a strategic tool is aggressive when it denies consent, overwhelms, and acts as force. These aggressive communication tactics do not seek to persuade, which requires consent and mutual openness to persuasion, but to force compliance, which is acquiescence. Finally, the dangerous demagogue who weaponizes communication does so to prevent themselves from being held accountable, from being questioned, debated, from having to give good reasons and persuade. Dangerous demagogues not only use weaponized communication as an authoritarian uses violence, but weaponized communication itself is a form of violence. Dangerous demagogues who weaponize communication are “information terrorists” (McKew par. 3).

One way to think of weaponized communication is as the widespread use of *ad baculum* (Latin for “appeal to the stick” or threats of force or intimidation). Thinking of dangerous demagoguery as force (as weaponized communication) allows rhetorical scholars to distinguish the rhetorical strategies of the heroic demagogue from the dangerous demagogue, thus acknowledging that rhetorical

tactics both support and are evidence of the two forms of demagogues. Simply, one sure sign that a leader of the people is a dangerous misleader of the people is by examining whether or not the leader weaponizes communication. These tactics will constantly change, but we can point to recent examples of demagogic weaponized communication, including: propaganda, conspiracy theory, fake news, and disinformation; doxing and spying and exposing people to public ridicule, shame, and aggression; hate speech, violent threats, and bullying; distorting meaning, taking words out of context, intentionally ignoring contradictory information; and distorting public sentiment through bots, algorithms, and computational propaganda. While some of these tactics fall under the traditional purview of rhetorical studies, many do not.

We typically think of *ad baculum* as a logical fallacy, especially in argumentation and debate. James Jasinski explains that *ad baculum* appeals involve some kind of threat but often involve ambiguity because it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between a threat and a warning (243). *Ad baculum* tactics in debate might include threats of physical violence but also could be overwhelming opponents or audiences with information so that it is difficult to track the debate's arguments or have time to refute them, or threatening to release private or embarrassing information about an opponent. Likewise, dangerous demagogues have used *ad baculum* attacks to put "pressure on [opponents] to refrain from taking up a position" (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 109–10). Beyond intimidation in debate contexts, dangerous demagogues typically use threats to prevent their opponents from holding them accountable. Threats are an effective means to an end: they are instrumental ways of gaining compliance because they are difficult to question or argue against. It's noteworthy when a political leader uses *ad baculum* threats because they are themselves a form of violence and antidemocratic.

Dangerous demagogues may use more than verbal threats of force to gain compliance. For example, according to Kenneth Burke, "Hitler also tells of his technique in speaking, once the Nazi party had become effectively organized, and had its army of guards or bouncers, to maltreat hecklers and throw them from the hall. He would, he recounts, fill his speech with provocative remarks, whereat his bouncers would promptly swoop down in flying formation, with swinging fists, upon anyone whom these provocative remarks provoked to answer" (212). Obviously not all dangerous demagogues will use physical force like Hitler did; however, all *ad baculum* attacks—whether or not they invoke actual physical violence—have the same end: to use coercion and intimidation to gain compliance. The fact that physical violence is possible makes *ad baculum* that much more powerful and that much more difficult to argue against.

If rhetoric is a method of arriving at *phronesis* via consent in the absence of *sophia*, then weaponized communication is an anti-rhetorical method of gaining compliance characterized by aggression, disregarding ethics, and instrumentality.

All weaponized communication tactics are designed to overwhelm audiences and are thus force, or “pre-political” and “despotic” ways to deal with people, as Hannah Arendt explained in *The Human Condition* (26–27). It is a whole collection of ever changing tactics that rely on the mechanism of force to allow demagogues to gain compliance and prevent themselves from being held accountable for their actions. In isolation some tactics may seem benign, even acceptable, but since these tactics are used strategically to shortcut critical thinking, their goal is to deny audiences the opportunity to give their consent.

To demonstrate how dangerous weaponized communication is for democratic governments, we can map currently used tactics onto Levitsky and Ziblatt’s authoritarian typology, which they used to explain how democracies die. First, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt, authoritarians reject or show a weak commitment to the “democratic rules of the game” (23). They give historical examples such as rejecting or expressing a willingness to violate the Constitution, undermining the legitimacy of elections, and using or endorsing extraconstitutional means to change the government, such as military coups or violent insurrections. Dangerous demagogues likewise use weaponized communication to reject or show a weak commitment to the democratic rules of the game of public deliberation, especially to prevent themselves from being held accountable for their words and actions. Dangerous demagogues attempt to *overwhelm the news cycle* to prevent negative stories from gaining attention by organizing, manipulating, and subverting hashtags on social media; by targeting people for retweets; and dumping unfavorable news when people are distracted. Dangerous demagogues attempt to *distort reality* by spreading propaganda, conspiracy theory, fake news, and disinformation. Dangerous demagogues attempt to *distort meaning* by taking words out of context, intentionally ignoring contradictory information, and intentionally subverting the dominant meanings of key words or using dog whistles to appeal to their partisans. Dangerous demagogues attempt to *distort public sentiment* through bots, manipulating algorithms, and computational propaganda. Dangerous demagogues also use typical rhetorical figures and fallacies such as *paralipsis* and *tu quoque* to say two things at once and accuse their accusers of being hypocrites. In these ways and more, dangerous demagogues weaponize communication. By attempting to overwhelm the news cycle and distort reality, meaning, and public sentiment, dangerous demagogues reject the democratic rules of the game of public deliberation, using these tactics to prevent a critical interrogation of their words and actions.

Second, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt, authoritarians “deny the legitimacy of political opponents” (23). They give historical examples such as describing rivals as subversive or against the constitutional order, claiming that rivals represent an existential threat to the nation or are acting as foreign agents, and describing their rivals as criminals who are not qualified to hold office. All of Levitsky and Ziblatt’s examples of denying legitimacy are the result of the

rhetorical positioning of opposition as illegitimate enemies, which makes this criterion especially relevant for rhetorical analysis. Dangerous demagogues use weaponized communication to deny the legitimacy of political opponents by using *ad hominem* attacks to constitute their opposition as illegitimate and by using *reification* to constitute their opposition as nonhuman enemy objects who are illegitimate. By using *ad hominem* attacks and *reification*, dangerous demagogues deny the legitimacy of their opposition, which denies them political standing, makes criticism easier to disregard, and makes it that much more difficult for the opposition to hold them accountable for their words and actions.

Third, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt, authoritarians “tolerate or encourage violence” (24). They give examples, such as having ties to armed gangs or militias, sponsoring or encouraging mob attacks, and refusing to condemn or praising political violence conducted in their name or elsewhere in the world. Dangerous demagogues likewise use weaponized communication to conduct violence or to signal that they tolerate or encourage violence. Dangerous demagogues use communication platforms to spread malicious information and spread information maliciously through doxing, spying, and exposing their opposition to public ridicule, shame, and aggression. Dangerous demagogues organize, encourage, or fail to prevent their supporters from using communication technologies to attack their opposition. Dangerous demagogues organize, encourage, or fail to prevent their supporters from physically attacking their opposition. Dangerous demagogues use *ad baculum* threats, *ad populum* appeals, *ad hominem* attacks, *reification*, and appeals to national or group exceptionalism to polarize citizens and threaten their opposition. In these ways and more, dangerous demagogues weaponize communication by tolerating or encouraging violence.

Fourth, and finally, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt, authoritarians are ready to “curtail the civil liberties of opponents and the media” (24). They give examples such as expanding libel or defamation laws, restricting protest and government criticism, threatening to punish rival parties or media, and praising repressive measures taken by other governments to restrict the civil liberties of opponents and the media. Dangerous demagogues likewise use weaponized communication to curtail civil liberties. Recent examples include jailing, threatening, and undermining journalists, refusing to hold press conferences, lying to reporters and subsequently blaming reporters for carrying false stories, threatening libel, attempting to bankrupt or devalue media companies to force them out of business, speaking only to favorable media organizations, forcing government workers to sign non-disclosure agreements, surveilling citizens by monitoring social media, deploying facial recognition software to track citizens, and by using rhetorical appeals such as *American exceptionalism*, *reification*, *ad populum*, *ad baculum* threats, and *ad hominem* attacks against political opposition and the press. In all these ways, dangerous demagogues weaponize communication to restrict the civil liberties of opponents and the media.

Levitsky and Ziblatt warn that violating even one of these four rules would indicate that a potential leader has dangerous authoritarian tendencies. Likewise, we could say the same about any potential leader who weaponizes communication in one of these four ways. Such a person would be a dangerous demagogue who would be difficult to hold accountable to the rule of law once in power. We saw many of these weaponized communication tactics deployed by Alex Jones in this essay's introduction—he “crashed” a panel, created political theater, declared it the one and only truth, and in the process exposed the panelists to public ridicule and malicious communication from *InfoWars* supporters. Jones used a bullhorn to talk over the panel, thereby gaining compliance. Jones refused to participate in the discussion, thereby preventing himself from being questioned or held accountable for his words and actions. In so doing, Jones violated authoritarian rules one, two, and three above—he violated the democratic rules of public deliberation, denied the legitimacy of his opposition, and exposed his opposition to potential violence. But Jones is not the only demagogue who weaponizes communication. For another useful example, then, we might turn our attention to an episode from the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

On April 27, 2016, *GQ* published Julia Ioffe's profile of future first lady Melania Trump, which told the story of Melania's childhood in Slovenia, her family, her modeling career, and how she met and married Donald Trump. The Trumps were not happy that the story also included information about Melania's secret half-brother or Melania's legal issues with her beauty brand, attacking the story as “yet another example of the dishonest media and their disingenuous reporting” on Melania's Facebook page. In response, neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin called for his Stormer Troll Army to “send her a tweet and let her know what you think of her dirty kike trickery. Make sure to identify her as a Jew working against White interests, or send her the picture with the Jude star from the top of this article. Gogoogogogogogogo. Because I'd bet dollars to hot dogs she's a LOLCOW” (“Empress Melania”; see also “Lolcow”). Stormers flooded Ioffe's e-mail, phone, and Twitter with toxic and intimidating messages and gleefully posted screen shots of their messages to Ioffe in their comments on Anglin's article. Ioffe confirmed the attack by retweeting some of the anti-Semitic tweets, images, and phone calls that she received, filing a police report against the threats, and discussing the coordinated attack on television. In response, Anglin posted, “Let it be known, Jews: if you go against us, you will end up with hurt feelings from mean words” (“Julia Ioffe”).

A few days later, on May 4, 2016, Donald Trump became the Republican Party's presumptive nominee. “Some of your supporters have viciously attacked this woman Julia Ioffe with anti-Semitic attacks, death threats,” Wolf Blitzer said to Trump on *CNN (Situation Room)*. “These people get so angry. What's your message to these people?” he asked. “I haven't read the article,” Trump responded, denying any knowledge of the events and shifting the topic from what Trump

would say to condemn the attackers to what Trump thought Ioffe had done to earn the attacks, “but I heard that it was a very inaccurate article and I heard it was a nasty article.” Blitzer again asked Trump to comment on “the death threats that followed.” Trump said, “I don’t know about that. I don’t know anything about that. Do you mean fans of mine? I know nothing about it. I don’t have a message to the fans.” Trump denied association with the Stormer Troll Army, but praised them as his “fans.” Seemingly, Donald Trump had no qualms with the Stormer Troll Army’s threatening tactics; he certainly did not condemn them in his *CNN* interview.

Trump’s response to Blitzer followed a rhetorical strategy that he frequently used when reporters questioned him about his weaponized communication tactics. Typically, when reporters tried to hold Trump accountable for the effects of his weaponized communication he first denied knowledge of the event; second, denied association with the people or act (and maybe praised them as “fine people” or “fans”); third, questioned what the person had done to deserve the attack; and, fourth, used *tu quoque* to accuse his opposition of similar tactics. In fact, Trump had also frequently used *ad baculum* threats to intimidate his opponents (Mercieca, “100 Days”). He frequently explained his aggressive rhetoric by calling himself a “counterpuncher,” but it often seemed he was the first to land a rhetorical punch.

In his interview with Blitzer, Trump denied any knowledge about the threats to Ioffe and called the white nationalists who weaponized communication to threaten her his “fans,” which white nationalists like Anglin read as an endorsement for the work of the Stormer Troll Army. “Asked by the disgusting and evil Jewish parasite Wolf Blitzer to denounce the Stormer Troll Army, The Glorious Leader declined,” wrote Anglin (“Glorious Leader”). “The Jew Wolf was attempting to Stump the Trump, bringing up stormer attacks on Jew terrorist Julia Ioffe. Trump responded to the request with ‘I have no message to the fans’ which might as well have been ‘Hail Victory, Comrades!’” (pars. 1 and 2). According to the white nationalists, Trump’s denial of knowledge about the attacks was actually a strategic embrace: “always remember: he looked straight at the camera and said ‘I have no message for the fans.’ Anything after that is just politics,” Anglin wrote the next day (“I Will Not Rage” pars. 6 and 7). When white nationalists used a coordinated attack to threaten and intimidate Ioffe on behalf of Trump, they used weaponized communication to violate authoritarian rule number one by showing a weak commitment to the democratic rules of the game of public deliberation and violated rule number three by showing a propensity for violence. In other words, according to the typology set out in this essay, Anglin and the Stormer Troll Army are dangerous demagogues who use weaponized communication tactics to gain compliance and avoid accountability.

While Anglin led the Stormer Troll Army’s attack on Ioffe, Trump also used several weaponized communication tactics in this example: first, he sought to

undermine journalists and the media industry by calling Ioffe's *GQ* article further evidence of "dishonest media and disingenuous reporters" on Melania Trump's Facebook page (Trump)—violating authoritarian rule number two by denying the legitimacy of opposition and rule number four by being willing to restrict the civil liberties of the opposition. Second, when Trump refused to hold the white nationalists accountable by condemning the attack he violated authoritarian rule number three by tolerating or encouraging violence. And, third, Trump used evasion and denial to prevent Wolf Blitzer from holding him accountable for the attack during his *CNN* interview: Trump would neither admit to knowing that the attack had occurred or that his supporters initiated the attack in his name—violating authoritarian rule numbers one, two, three, and four by refusing to play by the democratic rules of the game of public deliberation, denying the legitimacy of opposition, associating with those who commit violence and tolerating violence, and showing a willingness to curtail civil liberties. Therefore, according to the typology set out in this essay, Trump was a dangerous demagogue who used weaponized communication tactics to gain compliance and avoid accountability.

In these examples, Jones, Trump, and Anglin were all dangerous demagogues who used similar weaponized communication strategies for similar ends. And yet none of them were technically "leaders"—or, at least they were not leaders in the traditional sense of being elected officials. Jones led a multimillion-dollar media empire devoted to spreading conspiracy, Trump led a political campaign, and Anglin led the white supremacist movement. Like the "demagogues" of Ancient Athens, each was an "unofficial leader of the people" who refused to be held accountable for their words and actions. Of course, weaponized communication tactics can be used by anyone, whether official or unofficial leaders of the people. Despite the examples used here, weaponized communication tactics are not restricted to the right wing of the political spectrum, although they do support the current iteration of the right wing's angry populism.

Conclusion: The Danger of Weaponized Communication

On October 25, 1931, John Dewey gave a radio lecture on the relationship between education and democracy in the age of mass-mediated propaganda. "Democracy will be a farce," explained Dewey, "unless individuals are trained to think for themselves, to judge independently, to be critical, to be able to detect subtle propaganda and the motives which inspire it" (98). Dewey assumed that citizen critics could prevent dangerous demagogues from attaining power by using their rationality to assess public discourse—thereby holding leaders accountable for their words and actions. Public speaking, communication, and argumentation scholars have likewise argued that democratic citizenship requires training in critical thinking so the fallacious techniques of demagogues will not persuade the uninformed electorate. At least one method for controlling the demagogue's power, therefore, could be for citizens to use

critical thinking to analyze a demagogue's rhetoric. Since leading the people requires a relationship between the leader and the people, it makes sense that the people have a responsibility to hold their leaders accountable for their words and actions and prevent them from being demagogues. Yet many of the weaponized communication tactics described here cannot be detected easily, making it difficult for even the most vigilant citizen critics to hold their leaders accountable. Of course, this is precisely the problem with weaponized communication: it prevents institutions and citizens from holding dangerous demagogues accountable for their words and actions.

What can we say about the difference between the dangerous demagogue's weaponized communication and the heroic demagogue's use of rhetoric—between persuasion as compliance versus persuasion as *phronesis*? Weaponized communication's compliance is force whereas rhetoric's *phronesis* requires consent and thus is not force. To "assent" means "to think" and to "consent" means to "together think." To assent is to hold an opinion; to consent is to hold an opinion in common with another. Consent requires permission; one who consents agrees to adopt the feelings, perceptions, thoughts, or judgments of others (Mercieca, "Fourteenth" 307). Yet actual consent is impossible with weaponized communication. Compliance may be secured, but consent is not. The difference between these two perspectives is noteworthy here because weaponized communication is inherently despotic: it denies individuals the ability to decide for themselves. Heroic demagogues use rhetoric to persuade; dangerous demagogues use weaponized communication to gain compliance.

"How absurd it is to try to change the world by propaganda," stated Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in 1947: "propaganda makes language an instrument, a lever, a machine. It fixes the condition of men, as they have come to be in under social injustice, by setting them in motion. It counts on being able to count on them. Deep down all men know that through this tool they too will be reduced to a tool as in a factory" (255). Propaganda is but one tactic of weaponized communication, but what is true of propaganda is true for the rest: weaponized communication treats language as an instrument, as a means to an end and it treats people as tools. Horkheimer and Adorno wrote that propaganda was "misanthropic" because it denied "that policy ought to spring from mutual understanding" (255). Like propaganda, weaponized communication is misanthropic, and it enables dangerous demagogues to gain compliance and prevent themselves from being held accountable for their words and actions. Weaponized communication tactics treat communication as pure instrumentality, using rhetorical tactics and people as machines.

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